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SUBJECT: TURKISH MEDIA FIGURES DISCUSS HEADSCARF, POLITICS,
AND U.S. IMAGE IN TURKEY

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. Conversations between Consul General and top media representatives in Istanbul in January and February ranged from discussing the headscarf debate to the status of major political parties and the U.S. image in Turkey. Concern about suspension of important reforms and tensions over the headscarf and other issues expose some Turks' qualms about the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). In addition, certain statements by AKP members have fed secularist fears. AKP actions in the year-long run-up to municipal elections will sharpen and focus these debates. Given Turks' affinity for conspiracy theories and enduring support for AKP, debates about the AKP's motives and the future of Turkey will continue for some time without resolution. These conversations, which reflect the current state of political discourse here, were conducted off-the-record. Please protect editors' comments. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

Social and Political Currents in Turkey

¶2. (SBU) In January and February, the Consul General made courtesy calls on a series of media figures including Mehmet Ali Birand, Turkey's best known journalist, the anchor of Kanal D's highest-rated nightly newscast who is credited with toning down sensationalism in television news; Sedat Ergin, editor-in-chief of the secular daily Milliyet and Ferfat Boratav, General Manager of CNN Turk. This cable also reports her discussions during a call on pro-government Zaman and English-language Today's Zaman editors-in-chief Ekrem Dumanli and Bulent Kenes, respectively, along with Zaman's deputy editor and foreign news editor, Abdulhamit Bilici and Celil Sagir.

¶3. (SBU) Mehmet Ali Birand told the CG that Turkey is going through an incredible transformation, but "we don't know where we're headed." Current tension between the secular state and what he described as "the other part" (the religious conservatives) could become more relaxed or more difficult. "We've had problems," he said. "This is a difficult country to run. We'll manage."

¶4. (SBU) CNN Turk's General Manager Boratav felt despite social and political turbulence on the surface, Turkey's undercurrents are moving in the right direction. The country's integration globally on many levels, not just economically, is evidence of this, Boratav said, and nothing has slowed or reversed this tendency.

¶5. (SBU) Zaman editors maintained confidence during what they saw as a turbulent time in the Turkish democratic

experience, indicating it was important for Turkey to succeed "for the whole world, especially the Muslim world." Deputy Editor Bilici noted Turkey's role as a regional actor and praised the economic reforms introduced by former Prime Minister and President Turgut Ozal (1983-89), which transformed a statist economy into a modern, market-based economy.

¶6. (SBU) Birand speculated that in ten years Turkey would be more conservative. However, he maintained Turkey would not become the next Iran, as many fear, because the undercurrents for an Islamic revolution do not exist in Turkey. While there was some "fundamentalism" in the Black Sea, Southeast and central-Anatolian regions, Birand emphasized it is not a nationwide phenomenon. Zaman's Bilici also played down Islamist currents in Turkey, saying political Islam has never represented all Turks.

¶7. (SBU) Milliyet editor-in-chief Sedat Ergin claimed Turkish society has become very conservative under the AKP government. He predicted religious symbols and references would play an increasingly important role in the society. Emphasizing the importance of Turkey's unique secular legacy, Ergin said deterrents must be maintained in Turkey to prevent it from becoming an Islamist state. He warned against straying from secularist principles in a new constitution. Ergin said Milliyet always distances itself from political Islam and continues to support secularism strongly, explaining the press has "an important role" to play in keeping Turkey on the secular path.

The Headscarf Issue

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¶8. (SBU) Birand emphasized the need to understand the headscarf issue in Turkey as more than simply pitting the religious against the secular or the pious against the non-religious. Ergin discussed complexities of the headscarf issue, but stressed it could cause social unrest. He assured CG the issue would not be resolved by the time she leaves and she would "be even more confused by then." Boratav, for his part, claimed current complications over then headscarf were due to political opposition tactics and the lack of civil society involvement. He emphasized these problems will not go away, and the longer Turkey hesitates to confront them, the more difficult they will become. "Everyone knows this needs to be solved," he said.

¶9. (SBU) When the university headscarf ban is lifted, Birand predicted at first, "It will be gloomy; we will complain and be skeptical." After the initial turmoil, he believes the issue will pass peacefully and could ease tensions, provided religious NGOs and fundamentalists do not provoke students into confrontation or otherwise instigate discord. Birand expects universities to become more "covered," but does not foresee lifting of the ban on headscarves in official buildings.

¶10. (SBU) Commenting on the much-cited secularist fear that "mahalle baskisi" (neighborhood pressure) will lead to increased prevalence of the turban, Birand said the pressure "was always there" and the government can never force women to cover. However, Birand noted the turban is more widely apparent and has become "a modern version of chador." Zaman's editor-in-chief Dumanli also discounted fears of neighborhood pressure. As evidence, he claimed that during Ramazan no one pressures those who do not fast. He criticized the Dogan media group (which includes Milliyet, CNN-Turk, and Kanal D) for publishing "misinformation" to claim otherwise. "Our research shows this is not true," he continued. "Our culture emphasizes tolerance and respect." Bilici added it would be the papers' duty to fight any such pressures, if it existed, claiming "some people want political gains by exaggerating the situation." He believed

intellectuals and leftists do not trust society to decide for itself.

¶11. (SBU) The AKP's role in lifting the ban and the effects this process may have on AKP in the upcoming local elections came up in most meetings. Birand admitted he had been more optimistic about Turkey's prospects following AKP's victory in the July 2007 elections than he is today. He was concerned the AKP had jumped too quickly to abet National Movement Party (MHP) efforts to lift the headscarf ban, which might cost the AKP political capital it needs to take steps on other reforms. Although Boratav was critical of the timing, he was more supportive of AKP's efforts, saying AKP tried to do something about the problem, but the opposition moved to stop the process because of distrust of AKP. Boratav said systemic features of Turkish politics include the tendency that "the wrong people try to do the right things" and tend to put off the hard problems, hoping they will go away.

EU Accession

¶12. (SBU) During each of the meetings, the media representatives expressed concern over Turkey's EU accession process. Most often, they criticized AKP for delaying vital reforms in favor of the headscarf issue. Birand, Ergin, and the Zaman editors all claimed French President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel's opposition to Turkey's full EU membership was used as an excuse to sidetrack Turkey's EU accession plans.

¶13. (SBU) According to Birand, Turkey is "like an iceberg that needs an anchor," and "the best anchor for Turkey is Europe." He worried the AKP was giving up on what he called the "EU project" (the reform process), but remained positive about Turkey's bid for membership and reform efforts. "This year will be the test," he warned. If the AKP does not "get on with it" in 2008, nothing would stop critics from accusing the AKP of leading Turkey down a fundamentalist track.

¶14. (SBU) Ergin harshly criticized the AKP, saying it only paid lip service to pursuing EU membership as an election strategy. Purporting to have EU membership as AKP's main objective disarmed AKP opponents, according to Ergin, even allowing AKP to neutralize the military and gain the support of mainstream media. After the July 2007 elections, Ergin

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said he had not seen any AKP action to pursue EU membership. He claimed even liberal opinion makers and columnists have lost their faith in the AKP's EU plans.

¶15. (SBU) Kenes said both Zaman and Today's Zaman, despite pro-government leanings, had not hesitated to criticize the slow pace of reforms to Penal Code Article 301 ("insulting Turkishness") and the foundations law (since passed). Kenes claimed the government lacks the courage to tackle these issues due to nationalist pressure. Zaman editors argued reform should be undertaken for reform's sake, rather than to meet EU requirements.

¶16. (SBU) Boratav felt the AKP made an unfortunate tactical mistake in isolating the headscarf issue, leaving other reforms in limbo. He reasoned the AKP should have taken up the headscarf and other reform issues three years ago during an "EU reform current," when public support for Turkey's EU candidacy was much higher.

AKP and the Elections

¶17. (SBU) Boratav echoed a common sentiment that AKP's success in the previous election came in part because of the turnaround in the Turkish economy. He foresaw economic

reasons beyond AKP's control hurting the party in upcoming municipal elections and predicted AKP would not get the political boost it foresees from the headscarf issue. It may reap marginal gains, he conceded, but people will vote on economic stability. Birand also emphasized the importance control and the relationship with secularists would relax if it continues to improve. If the economy falters, he expects AKP to revert to "religious elements" for support.

¶18. (SBU) Bilici claimed PM Erdogan's populist talents and his "file of accomplishments" had been the driving force behind the AKP's victory. He is sure Erdogan is not a secret political Islamist and if Erdogan became more "Islamist," his popular support would drop. Dumanli added the AKP won handily in July in part due to a public backlash against the military's midnight memo and the constitutional court decision annulling the first round of presidential voting. Boratav commented on AKP's populist skills, saying it has "better contact with the people than anything I can remember." In Bagcilar, where CNN Turk's offices are located, Boratav said AKP "knows every household. This is not by chance. They pay for research."

¶19. (SBU) Ergin's view of the AKP was less complimentary. He claimed, "This government just doesn't have a flight plan with regard to any issue, from the Kurdish problem to the economy." He predicted that PM Erdogan's comment that headscarves can be political symbols would be used against him.

¶20. (SBU) Though they differed on their extent, Birand, Ergin, and Boratav all speculated on different factions within AKP. Birand said AKP was not a homogeneous group, as it contained elements from the former Motherland Party (ANAP), liberals, socialists, and 5-10% religious fundamentalists. Boratav underscored AKP's inherent strength born from "solidarity of forty or fifty years out in the woods," but one school of thought predicts the AKP will move so far to the center it will split. He could see a split along economic lines, as some in the AKP resent what they see as others in the party getting rich. Ergin said AKP is unique socially and politically because there are many different groups within the AKP. "One could claim that they pursue an Islamist agenda and also the opposite," he said.

Opposition or Lack Thereof

¶21. (SBU) Birand bemoaned the lack of real political opposition to the AKP, warning this could lead - in 10-15 years - to an opposition party emerging from the extreme religious right rather than from the left or center. He believes the AKP represents a "lesser evil" than MHP. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) does not function as a political alternative for Kurds because the DTP "can't say no to the PKK."

¶22. (SBU) Boratav also was pessimistic about opposition parties' chances in the upcoming local elections. He expects the Republican People's Party (CHP) will not pull more than 15-17 percent, due to its current leadership crisis. However, he signaled CHP Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul as

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someone to watch due to his skills in mastering the same populism which contributes to AKP's success. Zaman's Hilici said the last year had been a "political nightmare" for CHP and Democratic Left Party (DSP), especially after the military's "e-coup" of April 27, 2007, was denounced in the Turkish press.

The Kurdish Issue

¶23. (SBU) Echoing a common theory, Birand said the AKP and the Turkish military both want the conflict with the PKK to

continue. The AKP, he claimed, wants to let the fighting continue to separate the PKK from the larger Kurdish issue and improve its political chances in upcoming elections. He claimed the military knew intervention against the government would be a disaster because it would leave them trapped between the PKK and "religious fundamentalist fascists." As for the PKK, Birand said, it knows amnesty would be its demise, so it continues to demand Ocalan's release, a condition the Turkish government will never meet.

¶24. (SBU) Boratav worried the public did not understand the critical nature of the Kurdish issue. He reemphasized this persistent issue should be dealt with sooner rather than later. He echoed a widely held view the AKP dearly wants to take control of Kurdish-dominated Diyarbakir in the upcoming local elections. According to Borayav, this would be a "national conquest" for the AKP as it would give PM Erdogan "uncontested proof" the PKK does not represent Kurdish political aspirations. Boratav believed the military is "intrigued" by the possibility of undermining Kurdish political influence, but have reservations. Zaman's Kenes felt the government feared nationalist reactions and thus delayed action.

The U. S. and Turkey

¶25. (SBU) Both Birand and Boratav were positive about U.S. - Turkey relations. Birand believes Europe and America would serve as "dual anchors" for Turkey. Birand and Zaman's Dumanli both believed Turkish perceptions of the United States had improved dramatically since PM Erdogan's November 5 visit with President Bush and increased cooperation on the PKK. Birand noted, "It's very easy to influence public opinion in Turkey." Boratav added, "The once-ticking bomb seems to be diffused." He warned that there is no room for complacency. He stressed the Iraq and Iran issues are very sensitive and any "wrong steps" could jeopardize progress made in recent months.

¶26. (SBU) But, according to Boratav, a potent deep anger and mistrust of the United States still exists in Turkey, stemming from how Turks perceive American attitudes and actions in the Middle East and toward Muslims in general. He was skeptical how much recently improved perceptions would be reflected in public opinion polls, saying the polls are ephemeral.

¶27. (SBU) Zaman's Kenes, however, predicted if the Pew Survey of Global Attitudes were held today, the United States would get a 25-30% favorable rating (up from the 2007 rating of 9%). Bilici said Turks share a common consensus about "positive" U. S. values. Commenting on current youth views of the U. S. as anti-Islamic, Kenes said this is not fundamentally anti-Americanism, but a reaction to Bush Administration policies toward the Middle East, Iraq, Iran and the PKK. Dumanli criticized President Bush's use of the word "crusade" in describing the fight against terrorism, as the public perceived it as anti-Islam. He recalled before 9/11, many Turks admired the United States, especially appreciating U. S. involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo when "Europe did nothing." He believed the United States had lost credibility since then.

¶28. (SBU) To improve U.S. image in Turkey, Birand recommended, "Talk to everyone. Talk to Kurds. Talk to the DTP. And if you have the connections, talk to the PKK." The CG reminded Birand the United States does not talk to the PKK or terrorists in general.

¶29. (SBU) Boratav emphasized the difficulty of repairing the U.S. image abroad, warning "classic answers of public diplomacy" (without elaborating on exactly what he meant) would not work, as they are "decoded too easily." No one should assume Turkey would automatically still be in the "western camp." He encouraged more public diplomacy along

the lines of U/S Karen Hughes' interaction with women's groups on her 2005 "listening tour." Even though the meetings produces "tumultuous debate," Boratav said the Turkish public would embrace this as positive. The CG responded that we were doing more "nontraditional" public diplomacy which might not be so visible in the media.

¶30. (SBU) When asked what could be done to improve the U.S. image in Turkey, Kenes said that the United States should strengthen economic ties with Turkey, not only in the area of military technology. Dumanli recommended making available Turkish translations of books and reaching out to Turkish graduates of U.S. universities.
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